

# Neighbors take control at toxic park

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OAKLAND — Neighbors near lead-contaminated Verdesse Carter Park are tired of waiting for city and county officials to take care of the toxic problem in their midst. So they've taken matters into their own hands.

Two representatives from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry in Atlanta visited the neighborhood Wednesday at the invitation of Rafeeq Najl, president of the African American Development Association.

They met residents and toured the East Oakland neighborhood surrounding the former battery factory, now a pitted, off-lot between 96th, 98th and Bancroft avenues and Sunnyside Street.

Maureen Lichtveld, ATSDR's chief biomedical officer for public health in Atlanta, assured the residents she would devise a coordinated plan of action. It will include lead-testing of children, clean up and an open flow of information, something residents complained has not happened so far.

"The community is intent on trying to help ourselves," Lichtveld heard from Sunni Shabazz of Concerned Citizens of Elmhurst.



LAURA A. ODA — Staff

Rafeeq Najl, president of the African American Development Association, shows federal public health officer Maureen Y. Lichtveld an Elmhurst neighborhood park where high amounts of lead were found. Looking on is neighborhood resident Mae Austin.

"We went to the city, but they said it's not our responsibility. To this day, we don't know what is the responsibility of the city or the Alameda County Health Department," said Shabazz.

Neighbors have long suspected the park was contaminated, partly because their children began getting sick, and partly be-

cause the toxics became visible when they began leaching through cracks in the asphalt. Many neighbors remembered when the battery plant was running full blast.

"Every morning at 5 a.m. there was a big blast," said James Turrentine, the

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neighbor who hosted the meeting. "To this day I don't know what it was."

The plant was closed in 1974, and in 1978 converted to a park, complete with day care center and playground. It was closed again that year after tests at the site revealed lead concentrations 100 times higher than acceptable levels. A foot of topsoil was removed and replaced with clean dirt.

It was closed again in 1990 after residents complained about unusual corrosion of playground equipment. A consultant's report showed the underlying soil still contained unsafe levels of lead.

City officials disagreed with the report, but they removed the playground equipment, fenced off portions of the park and posted warning signs.

The 3-acre park was closed again in April 1993, mainly to quell resi-

dents' fears. In July 1993, city officials reported lead levels in some parts of the park were more than double the acceptable health standard.

About 17,000 cubic yards of soil, and rock that was found to contain arsenic, have been removed and hauled to toxic waste dumps. Workers also uncovered a buried rail car, old batteries and the factory's foundation.

But while the park itself is finally being cleaned up, residents complained that nothing has been done to remove the lead-contaminated soil from their yards.

Soil tests taken by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in December 1994 and again last month from yards in the neighborhood showed extremely high levels of lead in some cases, said EPA project manager Mike Bollet.

The data was given to a UC Berkeley researcher to analyze. But a report that was expected last month has still not materialized.

Part of the problem, Bollet said recently, is that officials aren't convinced the lead contamination in the yards only came from the battery factory. Other sources could be chipping lead paint.

But that's no comfort to the residents, many of whom have lived and raised children near the park for decades.

"My 5-year-old son stopped playing in the park when he was three because he started having nosebleeds and ... threw up all the time, like he had cancer," said Sheila Hall, who finally moved to another part of town. "He still has a lead concentration of 14. (The doctors) can't get it below that."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has set 10 as the limit to trigger public health concerns.

Children who have high levels of lead in their blood can develop learning disabilities and health problems.